**Monton Unitarian Church**

**7th March 2021**

**Lent – Tempted to Reflect**

**Welcome**

We each of us bring our light

To join the ‘carnival of lamps’.

We come as individual souls to gather in community,

Finding our purpose in connection,

Our freedom in the self’s surrender,

And our oneness in diversity.

*Carnival of Lamps, by Cliff Reed, based on words by Rabindranath Tagore*

A couple of weeks ago we entered Lent – and Easter is just over a month away. This time last year we were just beginning to grasp the fact that there was a nasty virus around, but I don’t think any of us had the slightest inkling of what a difficult journey was ahead of us. It’s been a very rocky road – isolation, fear, anger, grief and overwhelming tiredness of spirit and of body. So many people who were there at the beginning of the journey are no longer with us – others are but are struggling with long-term effects of the illness – young people among us may seem untouched but will carry long-lasting emotional scars. A long period of reflection is going to be needed to sort through what we’ve lost, what we’ve learned, and how we will move forward.

That theme of journeying and reflection runs through this period of Lent. The story of a man lost in a wilderness both physical and spiritual, searching his soul and his conscience to discern who he is, what he must leave behind, and where his path must lead, encapsulated in the mythical story of Jesus in the desert being tempted by Satan. But like with all myths there are elements of truth, and lessons we can learn.

So we will explore the journey of Lent, the time in the wilderness of both body and spirit, and celebrate our opportunities to walk this life’s paths together.

**Prayer, by Cliff Reed**

Our lives move in one direction, but we need not fear the destination. There are worse things than journey’s end, if end it be…

Worse things, like living without purpose, living without love, living without ever having seen the gossamer in autumn.

Spirit of Life, we are grateful for the things we need for our existence – our food and drink, our shelter from the storm, the clothes on our backs; the basics that everyone on earth should have.

But as Jesus said, ‘life is more than food’. Help us to receive with gratitude the things we need to *live*: the loving touch, the word of comfort, the vision of earth’s glory, the sense of your presence in all Creation.

Above all, help us to know you in ourselves and in those we meet – though sometimes we make it hard.

Our lives move in one direction, there is no going back. May joy be ours on the journey; joy in sharing it with those who share the Way. However long the road, however hard, help us, amid the tears, always to find reasons for laughter, song and praise as we travel together.

May it be so.

**Story – No sat-nav for us, by Ray Seal, from With Heart and Mind 2**

Our journey through life is through largely uncharted territory. We only have a sketch map and we certainly don’t have a ‘sat-nav’, that piece of technology which is meant to make it easier for travellers to reach their destination – but which, however, seems to make my journeys more stressful. The theory is, you tell it where you want to get to and then you follow its instructions. Fine if you know exactly where you are going and you are prepared to follow the instructions without question.

That system may work well for the followers of some religions and denominations for their journey through this life, but life’s journey for Unitarians is not like that. We may all have different destinations in mind or at least consider there to be options and will certainly want to ask questions along the way. How then are we to find our way?

To return for a moment to the ‘sat-nav’ analogy; I still carry a road atlas and road maps in my car when I’m on a journey. As Unitarians, I think that, as we journey, we still need to refer to the guides that earlier travellers have left us. We will all have our preferred guides; some may be old and ‘dog-eared’, some may give us something new and exciting that we may have only just discovered. And sometimes our maps may fail us and we have to stop and ask for directions.

Journeys have never been easy, and our Unitarian journey is no exception. But, open your eyes, stick with it and what a wonderful, fulfilling journey it can be. I don’t know where, or when it’s going to end. I’m just enjoying every moment of it.

No sat-nav for me!

**Reading – Singing Out for Love's Return, by Jake Morrill**

"The soul is made of love and must ever strive to return to love. Therefore, it can never find rest nor happiness in other things. It must lose itself in love. By its very nature, it must seek God, who is love."  
—Mechthild of Magdeburg, 13th century Germany

For twelve years, Daisy has been the best dog any person could love. But last week, when she disappeared into the woods? That wasn’t what I was thinking. As I tramped along the wet trail, calling for her, other words came to mind.

We’ve rambled together through these woods for years. Well, I ramble. She bounds. Even now, slowed by arthritis, something out there makes a puppy of her. So, mostly, she remains a black blur through the trees. After a while, I turn back and she meets me at the trailhead. Except last week, when, for the first time, she didn’t. I had to walk back up the trail into the woods, whistling, singing out, “Daisy! Daisy! Here girl!” Like a fool.

Which is how it is sometimes between me and God. Some know God as a thunderstorm: scary, overwhelming. Others, as a porch light: steady, soft, always on. But I like a Celtic image for the Spirit: a wild goose. Untamed, ungoverned by our words, our demands, our categories of mind. A wild goose goes where it will.

For Christians, Lent is a wilderness time. A time when it’s not clear how, or if, Love will win in the end. A time to ponder Love’s elusiveness. Its absence. I’ve known times when I’ve wandered, bereft. Maybe you have, as well. What if Love wasn’t a far porch light, toward which we had to trudge? What if it was a wild goose, a wet dog? Instead of some grim pursuit, in our desire to meet it, we’d be compelled to sing out. To invite, to entice it.

In the end, Daisy returned, very pleased with herself. But, before? In the woods? When I thought she was gone? All I knew was my part: to sing out her name.

Spirit of undomesticated power, beyond our full understanding, we are here: wondering, doubting, a little fearful, in need. Let us discover how to sing Love home again, that we might be vessels of Your creative peace, set free at long last in this world. Amen.

**Prayer, by Cliff Reed, adapted**

We have kindled our flame of fellowship.

May it be to us a symbol of springtime’s

Returning warmth and the Divine Light

That shines in every loving heart.

The Lenten Fast is with us.

We remember the wilderness days of Jesus; his lonely struggle with the inner tempter, with wild beasts for company, and angels attending to his needs.

We struggle too, in a cluttered wilderness of busy-ness, possessed by our possessions. We leave no room for wild beasts or angels. We cannot see the starlit glory of the desert sky.

Holy One, help us to be still. And may our minds and hearts respond.

Everywhere Spring is waiting to explode.

Snowdrops give way to daffodils, leaf-buds strain to open.

The season of birdsong is finding its voice.

And may our minds and hearts respond.

The wilderness is not a place to stay,

We are not born for solitude.

Jesus wrestled there alone

And won his holy struggle with himself.

Then he left it, knowing his purpose.

May we too leave the wilderness with new resolve.

The interactions of fertile ground

With light and warmth and rain

Produce the miracles of germination and of growth.

Our ancestors danced and sang

To celebrate the time.

We too rejoice that, out of winter’s dearth,

The life and plenty of the Earth are born again.

For we are her children and her dust.

Lent leads us to another resurrection,

But first the path of pain and anguish,

The path of betrayal and desertion.

The self’s surrender is witness to the truth of love.

On the cross, Jesus knew nothing of Easter Day.

We remember those who share his cross today,

Martyred for love and for humanity.

When the third day dawns and we rejoice at the spirit’s triumph,

May we not forget their myriad Calvaries.

In the name of all who have walked the Way of love and sorrow,

Amen.

**Music**

**Reflection – Tempted to Reflect**

We are coming up to the year’s anniversary of the start of the first lockdown. That feels fairly hard to comprehend – I’m sure most of us, when this started, were thinking it would just be a few weeks and we’d be back to normal – instead, ‘normal’ seems like an old memory, and time seems to have warped somehow.

Over this past year, there will be things we have lost – time, holidays, rites of passage – connections with friends and loved ones, shared events. Hopefully for many of us there is still plenty of time to catch up on those, and to honour belatedly the events that need acknowledgement – but equally we know that for others, we have had to say goodbye, and there is no more catch-up time, and that pain will stay with us.

There will also be things we may wish to leave behind – some of our old ways of doing things, the old patterns of living, may no longer feel sustainable, and through the enforced slowing down, we may realise that there are better ways of living. That’s part of the learning – learning how our lifestyles may be damaging the world in more ways than we originally realised, learning how to change and to heal, learning how to create new, healthier relationships with each other and with the planet.

And moving forward. The way out of lockdown has been laid out, whether it happens at quite the speed we hope for or not. We shouldn’t rush it – that could be counterproductive – but we will be looking forward, seeing glimmers of hope for renewed contact with people, and quite literally brighter days! The church is going to be working out its way forward too – when we can re-open for worship safely, when the hall can begin to operate again – and oh, when we can have our coffee mornings again!

But these next few weeks, as we begin to rediscover our world, as the pandemic slowly, hopefully, lets go its grip on us, is a time to reflect, to consider who we are, why we are, and how we are going to move forward into this new world.

In the Christian Church, Lent acknowledges the time after Jesus’ baptism, when he goes into the desert to search his soul and discern his path in life. The story may be familiar to some of you. So, in the Gospel of Matthew, verses 4 to 11, we read:

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be temptedby the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

“‘He will command his angels concerning you,  
    and they will lift you up in their hands,  
    so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour.“All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

It’s a strange story in many ways. It makes some very obvious statements, as in, who wouldn’t be hungry after forty days and nights of not eating, for example! And it’s easy to imagine that towards the end of that fast, he would be hallucinating all sorts of things, even the appearance of the devil asking him a series of random sounding questions. But while we do not need to read this as a story based on fact, as with all myths, it can give us cause for reflection, particularly at this time of beginning to move forward from the pandemic.

Let’s take each temptation on its own. The first is to turn stones into bread so that Jesus can eat. Each human being needs their physical needs met, there is no question about that – though sadly, we are very far from that being the case at present. But the response is a challenge – “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” We need more than food. More than shelter. We could get very technical and discuss Maslow’s hierarchy of needs if we felt like it, but the simple version is that our minds and our spirits need nurturing as much as our bodies do. We can provide all the physical requirements for human existence, but life is about more than existence. To live, truly LIVE, we need love, and beauty, and poetry, and praise, and compassion, and touch – how much have we missed the touch of another’s hand recently, never mind those full-on bear hugs!

And as we reflect on who we are, and where we are, and where we need to go coming out of this pandemic, that question as to which of our needs, and others’ needs are being met, are key to how we move forward – are we as a society going to keep pushing down the consumerist, materialist path, to the neglect of mind and soul and planet? Are we going to keep valuing ‘stuff’ over creativity, money over human care, greed over compassion? Or are we going to work to change the values of our society so that all those “key worker hero” statements are echoed by our society and economy, and so that the work that meets our spiritual needs, the creative arts, and the caring professions, are valued as much if not more than so much of the plastic ‘stuff’ that the materialistic society tells us is what will really make us happy, even though it never does.

The second temptation challenges Jesus to risk himself in the expectation of a miracle that would save him. To this he responds, “Do not put your Lord to the test.” This could be simply interpreted as just, don’t court danger in order to show off your protection, but I find myself reading something else into it, which probably comes from my humanist theology – that we shouldn’t expect ‘divine intervention’ in our lives, but instead work on the basis that we are the agents of Love’s work, and that the miracles that Love does create, from the flower growing through the crack in the concrete wall, to the smile on the face of a child who has survived unimaginable horrors, are all around us.

For a bit of light relief, that reminds me of the story of the person whose house was surrounded by a flood, and they prayed to God for rescue. The fire service arrived with a dingy, but they said no, no, God will save me. The waters kept rising, and they climb to the roof. The police arrive with a helicopter, but again, no no, God will save me. But the person ends up drowning. In heaven, they ask – all my prayers and you never answered me, God, why?? To which comes the slightly snarky answer, well I sent a boat and a helicopter, what else could I do?!

That message that humans are the agents of Love’s work, that we have to choose the actions and the statements that will serve Good on this earth, is a strong lens through which to examine our past actions, to reflect on what our particular skills and talents and experiences are, and moving forward, how best those skills should be put to use.

The final temptation places Jesus above all the kingdoms of the world and offers them to him, if he will but kneel and worship Satan. And he could have thought to himself, if I’m in charge then I can make people live the right way, I can rule them well and they’ll behave better – all I have to do is kneel, that’s not too hard. But no – the only thing he would worship was God, and as he taught through his life, God is love. So he would lead people to goodness through the example of love that he would show, not through any force, or power, or ‘rule’. And here too is something for us – that we can guide people to Love through the way that we live, the way that we interact with each other, the way that we demonstrate our compassion and care.

The two readings that we shared today make two extra points. The first reminded us that there is no Satnav for our journey – we can’t google a route and follow it blindly. There is guidance, and suggestions, that can be found in scriptures, in poetry, in observations of nature, but there is no one who can tell us definitively what our path should be. That is something that only we can discern over time, and sometimes we may feel like we are stumbling over obstacles with no clear path or direction at all, but it is still for us to find our way.

But the second, the story of Daisy the dog being ‘mislaid’ in the woods, and having to call her name – and the image of the Spirit of Love as a wild goose, ungoverned and free – let me read that passage again.

Some know God as a thunderstorm: scary, overwhelming. Others, as a porch light: steady, soft, always on. But I like a Celtic image for the Spirit: a wild goose. Untamed, ungoverned by our words, our demands, our categories of mind. A wild goose goes where it will.

For Christians, Lent is a wilderness time. A time when it’s not clear how, or if, Love will win in the end. A time to ponder Love’s elusiveness. Its absence. I’ve known times when I’ve wandered, bereft. Maybe you have, as well. What if Love wasn’t a far porch light, toward which we had to trudge? What if it was a wild goose, a wet dog? Instead of some grim pursuit, in our desire to meet it, we’d be compelled to sing out. To invite, to entice it.

For me, that’s a reminder that it’s not all about us ploughing forward, non-stop, with our blinkers on so we don’t get distracted. Sometimes we do need to pause, and think, and nurture ourselves – go for that wander through the woods, sit on the beach, or the bench in the local park. And we need to sing – to sing through our lives, sing through our witness, sing through our words and deeds to the Love that we know is there, even if sometimes we don’t feel totally connected. And that singing will bring love back to us, and will call others to join in the walk with us, to share the pilgrimage, and to join in the song until everyone can hear it.

So this Lent, take time to ask yourself who you are, where you are, and where you wish to be going. Take time to consider your sources of wisdom, whatever and whoever they are, and still be prepared to get a little bit lost for a while. And take time to sing from your heart, through your eyes, your smile, the touch of your hands, so that the path of Love becomes clearer for all to see.

**Blessing – by Eric Williams**

Blessed is the path on which you travel.  
Blessed is the body that carries you upon it.  
Blessed is your heart that has heard the call.  
Blessed is your mind that discerns the way.  
Blessed is the gift that you will receive by going.  
Truly blessed is the gift that you will become on the journey.  
May you go forth in peace.